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ABSTRACT

Basic considerations in the assessment of an individual's quality of life include: (1) the nature of the scales used for reporting; (2) the domains included in the overall assessment and their relative importance to the individual; (3) the time frame of the reporting period as either stated or implied; (4) the extent to which the personal report is influenced by relatively extraneous factors; and (5) the extent of agreement between subjective and objective measures of well-being. Scales used in assessing the quality of life include degree of satsifaction on a seven-point scale, extent to which needs and wants are met on a five-point scale, and extent to which each of a large number of descriptive sentences applies on a three-point scale. Samples of domains have ranged from small sets of 10 or 15 areas to up to 200 specific items. Procedures such as the critical incident technique and multi-variate analysis have been used to select the final set of domains. (Author)

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Basic Considerations in the Assessment of Quality of Life

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One of the main factors leading to some of the divergent findings and disagreements in developing and using measures to assess the quality of life has been the lack of a central concept underlying the items included as relevant factors. For example, investigators have included items ranging as widely as "What you are accomplishing in your life," "The extent to which you maintain links to the past and to traditions," "The extent to which you feel free and easy," "The extent to which you think clearly and creatively," and "The amount of imagination and fantasy in your life." The lists produced by various investigators emphasize and omit different things depending on the biases of the people involved.

A unifying concept that provides the basis for a unique and empirical definition of quality of life for a given population is provided by using the critical incident technique. This procedure collects specific reports from a sample of individuals describing actual behaviors and experiences that they observed to have a definite effect on their quality of life. The observed effect could have been either positive or negative. The specific incidents, usually several thousand of them, are sorted into categories that include all of the factors observed to have had an effect on the quality of life of this sample of people. Certainly an approach of this type should be very helpful in bringing some order in place of the present confusion introduced by the relatively subjective selection of domains that has characterized a number of recent efforts in this field.

A closely related question is "How many factors or domains should be used." Practical considerations have resulted in most investigators using between 10 and 20 categories. The several thousand critical incidents mentioned above led to the formulation of 15 components of quality of life for adults in America. The use of many more components becomes cumbersome and having less appears to preclude the separate consideration of some important aspects of quality of life. The assessment of an individual's status with respect to a relatively small number of domains that have been

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empirically demonstrated to be critical to the person's overall quality of life results in questions and answers that are much more objective, practical, and reality-based than the typical types of personality test questions which inquire about preferences, social habits, and personal feelings. In assessing the 15 critical components of quality of life the respondent is asked to answer questions about such items as "Material comforts--things like a desirable home, good food, possessions, conveniences, an increasing income, and security for the future" or "Work in a job or at home that is interesting, rewarding, and worthwhile." These contrast with such items as "The variety and diversity in your life," "Are your feelings easily hurt," and "Do you ever worry about having a nervous breakdown." It is important that the respondent have a clear referrant so that a report of day-to-day life is obtained rather than speculation about personal style or concerns.

In addition to separate assessments of these several domains or components of quality of life it is very desirable to obtain an estimate of the global or overall well-being or quality of life of the individual. The principal issue in this area is the definition of the overall dimension to be evaluated. Various investigators have used happiness, general well-being, satisfaction with life, estimated relation to the best possible or worst possible life, feelings about life, overall quality of life, and various combinations of both domain scores and overall estimates. Perhaps the most important thing that can be said about these global or overall measures is that they elicit different results from individuals. Of course they are all fairly closely related but there are also clearly observable differences. For example, Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers[1] point out the young tend to rate themselves as more "happy" and less "satisfied" and the old reverse this, estimating that they are less "happy" and more "satisfied." They also suggest that "happiness" seems to connote feelings whereas "satisfaction" involves a more cognitive comparison of the perceived discrepancy between aspiration and achievement.

It appears that asking a direct question such as, "At the present time, how would you describe your overall quality of life?," encourages the individuals to give a somewhat more objective appraisal of their status than

questions directed at "happiness," "satisfaction," or estimates of position along a scale from "best possible" to "worst possible" life. In response to the request for a direct description of their overall quality of life about twice as many 70-year-old blacks as compared with whites report that it is only "fair" or "poor."[2] This seems reasonable and directly contradicts findings from studies using a question on satisfaction with life that shows older blacks reporting themselves more frequently as satisfied with their lives than is typical of the whites. It appears that a somewhat more objective report of activities and situations can be obtained by asking how well needs and wants are met. This still involves a perception by the reporter but it is a perception of a slightly more objective observation than happiness or satisfaction. Needs and wants tend to connote necessities and requirements.

On the question of the scale on which the respondent reports, practice has varied from two-point "yes or no" replies to 12-point "completely satisfied" to "completely dissatisfied" scales. A discussion by George Miller [3] suggests that for a wide variety of judgments the number of categories that can be discriminated is about seven. However, in a long interview it seems likely that the advantage of using a seven-point scale rather than one with five points would be more than offset by the annoyance at having to repeat the seven points for each question. The use of a scale having only three to nine points tends to reduce the maximum correlation that can be obtained with other continuous measures. It seems likely that a single overall measure will provide better discrimination if the scale contains about seven points. Another procedure for improving this overall measure is to use slightly different but essentially similarly worded questions at two different points in the interview. It would probably be best to ask the first overall question half-way through the interview and the second at the end. The results from the two questions would be combined to get a more reliable and therefore more valid measure of general well-being or overall quality of life. Two overall measures collected in the same interview can be expected to agree to the extent indicated by a correlation coefficient of 0.60 to 0.70. Combinations of several domain measures selected a year apart can be expected to show reliability coefficients

for their sums of 0.70 to 0.80.

A point not well established was emphasized by a recent study by New Zealand psychologists[4]. This relates the time frame stated in the question to the stability of the responses. Using a set of 129 questions such as, "I feel that life is meaningful," "I feel loved and trusted," and "I smile and laugh alot," groups of college students responded to the questions on two occasions, two weeks apart. Three groups were involved. The instructions for completing the items for the first group asked them to respond in accordance with the way they had been feeling "in the past month;" the second group was asked to respond in accordance with the way they had been feeling in the past week; and the third group was asked to respond in accordance with the way they had been feeling for the past day. The correlation coefficients showing the stability or reliability over this two-week interval for these three groups were: month group, 0.83; week group, 0.57; and day group, 0.25.

These results emphasize the importance of establishing a time frame when asking about an individual's state of well-being. It seems likely that differences would also be found for evaluations of a person's life as a whole as compared with his or her life in the past year or past few months. They also emphasize the instability of reports of feelings such as happiness as compared with reports on how well needs and wants are met with respect to such things as "work," "active recreation," and "material well-being."

In studying the contributions of various factors to the quality of life of adults it is important to avoid confounding the interpretation of the results by failing to control for the use of a wide age range, for urban-rural differences, or for the time period to be considered. In a number of instances these somewhat extraneous factors have led to conclusions that were later found to be unwarranted when these factors were controlled.

In conclusion this review suggests that the most important consideration in assessing the quality of life is to develop questions that tap actual experience and conditions--more specifically, empirically defined domains of critical behaviors.

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